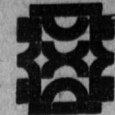


An Impromptu Model



By
ZONA GALE.

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WHAT a place for a picnic!" Etheldreda said, drawing rein. "Picnic?" Linnie questioned fatuously. Linnie was four, and his feet hardly overhanging the edge of the phaeton seat. He had a wholly maddening way of saying over, earnestly and piercingly, some one word of what had gone before.

"A little clearing with buttercups around," Etheldreda said. "And there is a path. Nobody knows where it goes. And where it goes is the only thing about a path that doesn't matter. We might have a picnic, Linnie, if we had something to eat."

"Cookie?" Linnie suggested politely, and went down in the pocket of his round-about and brought up eight or nine crumbs.

Etheldreda was looking across the clearing and up the path.

"Linnie," she said, "shall we tie Itty Bitty Colty and go explore?"

The child threw himself headlong from the seat. And Etheldreda, interpreting, alighted and tied Itty Bitty Colty, which also being interpreted meant Little Bit of a Colt, and was Linnie's name for the pony; but they usually called him the I. B. C., for short.

"A' go wear no hat," announced Linnie, casting his salter into the phaeton. "Aw gone hat."

"Neither will I," Etheldreda assented, and Linnie beamed. In his little heart he loved her because Etheldreda was deliciously likely to agree with him. Aunt Cecil would certainly have said: "Indeed you are. Pick up your hat and put it on—at once, Linfield!" He folded his hand about two of her fingers, and hopped joyously beside her, suspending from those two fingers, at each hop, as much of his own weight as was possible.

"Stand just where you are, please!" called a voice.

That voice—it was a disconcertingly peremptory voice, with no little modifying uplifts of intonation to reassure the hearer. It was not, certainly, an unpleasant voice. It had a ring of authority that was magnetic, as is all true authority. (Or is not, if you believe the other way.) It was, in short, a kind of robber-voice—voice of a real robber in cloth-of-green and green-laced doublet—oh, a voice of a robber in a wood—

She stood still obediently and instinctively, and Linnie gave a gasp of dreadful joy, and clung about her skirts. The sun which fell upon her hair was also in her eyes and dazzled her. But up the lane of light along which the voice had come she divined a man under a butternut tree.

"Just as you are, please—what a thought to bring the child!" he said.

Then she saw the easel and checked her laugh. Not that she would have laughed at a robber, either; but the easel made the situation even more grave. One can run from a robber; one can hardly run from an artist, even if one wished. And with the sun falling gloriously through the leaves of the wood, in a morning of spring, why should one run at all?

"It isn't the light I wanted," said the Artist, "but it's a most bully light."

Under a divided tree whose trunk curved outward in the perfect half of a Gothic arch, she stood quietly, her heart beating just pleasantly enough not to beat any harder. And the dress that had made Linnie happy and the bright hair that he was not tall enough to see were manifestly not missed by the Artist.

"By Jove!" he said once, softly, up at the other end of the lane of light.

Then Linnie took courage. Nobody who is not four knows the tragedy of being motionless. He looked up at Etheldreda doubtfully, one eye showing.

"Keep the child as he was, please!" said the robber-voice sharply; "keep him quiet if you can." Etheldreda spoke under her breath.

"Linnie," she said, "do you care to drive Itty Bitty Colty home? All the way?"

Like a few minutes more with you, if you please." Etheldreda moved a little away, hesitated, and sat down on a log. It would have been easy—so easy to slip into the wood and run away. Easy, and yet too difficult to do. Also it is difficult to belle one's spirit for adventure.

"Now he ain't lookin'," squeaked Linnie helpfully. "Le-le's run home."

"Linnie Little-Boy wants to run home?" Etheldreda was therefore constrained to ask severely. "Oh, well," said Linnie loftily, "I do mean now. I mean after now."

"Ah, quite so." Etheldreda assented, and watched him lovingly as he pattered about at ferns.

"I'm afraid I've kept you standing a frightful

rooting about among the fern, and he saw and came running tip-toe.

"He's Winchell's rabbit," the Artist explained, "and he's so tame I think he's sugar."

"Tame sugar?" Linnie repeated, and went down in the pocket of his round-about and brought up his eight or nine crumbs. Whatever they may have been the rabbit understood them and nibbled gratefully away.

Whereupon: "Tum, Wabbit," said Linnie, and, scattering more crumbs, scrambled softly backward on the ground, the rabbit jerkily following, wriggling its nervous little nose. They saw its pink jewel eyes sending startled glances toward them and then away to the gloom of the wood, as if for

"Are you too tired to pose again?" he asked eagerly.

"Oh, I—no!" said Etheldreda. "But Linnie, I'm afraid the child—"

"Come then!" he commanded her briefly, "come! And call the child. We'll give him Winchell's rabbit, to keep. Call him, please, and get him to stand for a moment."

With the promise of Winchell's rabbit for his own, Linnie stood still as if he, too, had been made of sugar. It was as if the dream of possessing the small creature had made him "Linnie-Man." And when at last they released him:

"I been boin' a bush," he explained, with a gentle sigh. "Aw gone bush!" he cried joyously. "I'm a antelope now. Want to see me wun?"

It had been a wonderful half-hour for Etheldreda, from which Linnie's zoological emerging hardly aroused her. But this the Artist did effectually.

"If you will stand still again to-morrow," he said gravely, to Linnie, "you shall have a new hutch for him besides. I know a man who will make one. Will you?"

Linnie squeaked with the certainty of his intention to do so. And the Artist said gravely to Etheldreda:

"You will come to-morrow, you know, at the same hour—you and the child. But will you try, please, to come on the hour? You were very late this morning. I lost the light I really wanted."

Then Etheldreda murmured something, caught at Linnie's hand, and was off precipitately down the path to the road.

To Linnie's amazement, when they reached the clearing of buttercups, Etheldreda caught him in her arms and kissed him.

"That," said she, "was an adventure, blessed child."

"Aunt Cecil," Etheldreda asked that day, "who has the lodge?"

Miss Cecil made her lips in a little straight line while she braided her embroidery silks.

"An artist," said she, to whom an artist was an artist.

"What artist, dear?" asked Etheldreda, to whom an artist was an artist, or not. She went on making a house of cards for Linnie.

"His name is Moberly—John Moberly," Miss Cecil said, in a tone like another straight line.

"Moberly!" Etheldreda repeated—and her voice was always a thing of soft curves that Miss Cecil did not hear, so it was no wonder that Miss Cecil did not hear them now.

"Moberly," Miss Cecil assented. "Linnie, pick up your cards." Then she saw the girl's eyes lifted with something that unaccountably held her own.

"Only that Mr. Moberly is a tremendously famous man, you know," Etheldreda said slowly.

"No," Miss Cecil said, "I did not know. I pay no attention to values that are likely to be pronounced false by the next generation. Linnie pick up your cards."

"Cards?" said Linnie pleasantly, building on.

"At once, Linfield!" said Miss Cecil. "Auntie does try so hard. There's a Mr. Joseph Winchell in the lodge, too," she volunteered. "He really took it first. But he is away now."



IT WAS A KIND OF ROBBER-VOICE

time," the Artist said. He had come softly along the soft path, quite as if the path were in the conspiracy. She looked up at him—a long way it was to look, too, but one did not mind that because one was rewarded.

Which means that the Artist was very good to look at—blond beard, blue eyes and big brown capable hands, delicate enough hands, too, but looking as if they painted when there happened to be no swords or oars about for the handling.

Etheldreda said: "I'm not tired, thank you," and it was a bit dangerous now, so that her heart beat as if it knew how to beat ever so little harder. For he would know in a minute that she was not the model for whom he had inexplicably taken her.

"You mustn't let me tire you, you know," he told her; "I'm no end glad to get you to pose for me—no end obliged to you, and to Mr. Winchell for telling me about you. And if you get tired you must let me know, please. I'm sure to forget."

His eyes were quite impersonal, and there was, Etheldreda saw, no doubt at all that he took her for some unknown model whom some unknown Mr. Winchell had sent to him.

It was then that the path, having done its maddest, relented and proved itself a friend in conspiracy. For from its infinite resources it suddenly did the most natural thing in the world; it yielded up a rabbit.

Instantly the Artist was on one knee, holding out a finger. And Etheldreda turned to Linnie,

reassurance. Back among the ferns Etheldreda and the Artist could hear the child softly talking to the little thing, like a question and like an answer.

"Sometimes I've an idea," said Etheldreda abruptly, "that he sees things in the wood that the rest of us don't see."

The Artist looked at her quickly.

"I haven't a doubt of it," he said. "Why not? You see things in the woods that he doesn't see, you know."

"Yes," Etheldreda assented.

"Jove," said the Artist, "that's what I'll make the picture."

At which Etheldreda was silent, forgetting the mere novelty of the moment in its sudden significance.

Moberly. Mr. Winchell sent me. Mother thinks he meant yesterday, but I think he meant to-day."

For a moment Moberly looked at her. Then: "Here," he said, "is something for your trouble. Come back next week, please. You will do admirably then. To-day I've already an engagement."

But even before she had disappeared, Moberly knew that he had no engagement. All at once the horrible truth was upon him. He stared helplessly at the sketch he had begun yesterday, breaking into a slow smile that was never finished and that left him frowning into the Gothic butternut tree.

"Whom," said Moberly tensely, "whom was I sketching yesterday?"

Nobody answered that. And in a moment Moberly laughed a little, as a man will laugh at a very delicious memory that nothing can change. But even as he laughed, Winchell's white rabbit ran out from a tree-hole, and he remembered how he had last seen it. And when, an hour or more later, Winchell arrived from his train, and came whistling through the fern, Moberly still sat there, criminally idle in that light of spring. But he fell upon Winchell eagerly.

"That model you promised to send me," he said, "what was her name?"

"Vron," said Winchell brightly, "Sophie Vron. Nice little thing, I thought, for some of your Dutch notes—"

"No, no," Moberly said, "I mean the other. Who was the other?"

Winchell stared. And Moberly nodded to his sketch. Barely suggested, but instinct with life as the very shadow of Etheldreda, was the witnessing work that he had done yesterday.

"Do you know who that is?" Moberly demanded. "It was she who came. And I thought—"

Winchell looked, and then, like a brute, he laughed.

"Dear man," he said, "that, I am certain will be Miss Cecil. Yes, Miss Etheldreda Cecil. This is her lodge, these are her acres, you is her house, to which she has just come home. I met her once, in the Pineal Gardens. One doesn't forget her, you know. Did you actually—"

But Moberly never heard the rest. And what he said was, one would have thought, about the last thing that a man, at such a time, would say.

"Winchell," he begged, "oh, Winchell, please, will you give me your little white rabbit?"

IV.

"Picnic?" Linnie inquired expectantly next morning.

"We had our picnic yesterday, in the garden, you know," Etheldreda reminded him firmly.

"No picnic!" mentioned Linnie politely.

"Ah, well," said Etheldreda, "it is a wonderful morning, Linnie—though you don't altogether understand that. But we will go quite in the other direction."

The other direction led, after many an affair of hill-tops against blue, and double rows of sweet hedges, and fields rugged under their green, to the Narrowest Road in the World. Or it must have been nearly so, for it was a very narrow road.

And on either side was an arrangement of dogwood that looked as if it had been massed a-purpose, with a pleasant grove at the back. And nobody knew what he could be doing there, still criminally idle in such a light of spring, but straight before them, coming toward them with all his might, was Moberly. Whereupon Etheldreda drove close to the dog-wood, lowered her sun-shade a little, quite as if the Narrowest Road in the World were not in the conspiracy.

But Linnie had recognized.

"Airs 'at man," he began loudly. "Now, air's 'at man—"

Next Week, "A Strange Obsession," By Silson Young.